DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 680 SE 041 776

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TITLE The Population of China. One Billion, Eight Million People.
INSTITUTION Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 5p.; Based on the Population Reference Bureau's Population Bulletin, "China: Demographic Billionaire" by H. Yuan Tien. Charts/graphs may not reproduce clearly.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Inter-Change. Population Education Newsletter; v12 n2 May 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Birth Rate; *Chinese; Communism; Demography; *Family Planning; Foreign Countries; *National Programs; *Overpopulation; Population Growth; *Population Trends; Resource Materials
IDENTIFIERS *China; PF Project

ABSTRACT

Several programs have been instituted in China over the past 30 years in order to slow the birth rate. The population, set at 1,008,175,288 people by a 1982 census, is by far the largest of any nation. A 10-year family planning program, begun in 1957, caused the birth rate to drop considerably through the mid-1960's. In 1971, "wan xi shao," the most organized fertility-control program the world has known, was launched. Focusing on later marriages, longer intervals between births, and two children per family, the program used incentives, peer pressure, and birth control to meet quotas. In 1978, a one-child campaign was deemed necessary. Incentives were used to encourage couples to pledge to have only one child. By August 1982, over 15 million one-child certificates had been issued. This program has not been without problems, one of which is an apparent increase in female infanticide. The government's goal is to have a population of 1.2 billion by the end of the century; however, this appears to be unrealistic. This newsletter includes eight questions for classroom discussion and a bibliography of one reference and two additional resources. (DC)

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Population Reference Bureau, Inc.

Population Education Newsletter

ISSN 0047-0465
Vol. 12, No. 2

May 1983

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The Population of China

One Billion, Eight Million People

Outsiders have always been fascinated by China. But perhaps not since the days when Marco Polo brought back news of the land of Kubla Khan has interest been so high.

In part the interest is curiosity which mounted during the long years under Mao Zedong when a veil of secrecy was drawn arcund the giant country. During these years, it was almost impossible for foreigners to obtain information about the People's Republic of China. Since normalization of relations, a steady stream of Westerners and others have visited the People's Republic. In turn, much more information has flowed to the outside world from the once-secretive nation, including information about China's population policies.

The enormous population of China represents over one-fifth of the world's people—22 percent—and is another explanation for curiosity about this country. Its sheer size means that it carries great weight in world statistics. For example, for many years, some of the most respected sources of demographic information differed among themselves on such important questions as: What is the population of the world? What is the average birth rate of the world? How fast is the world's population growing? When will it stop growing?

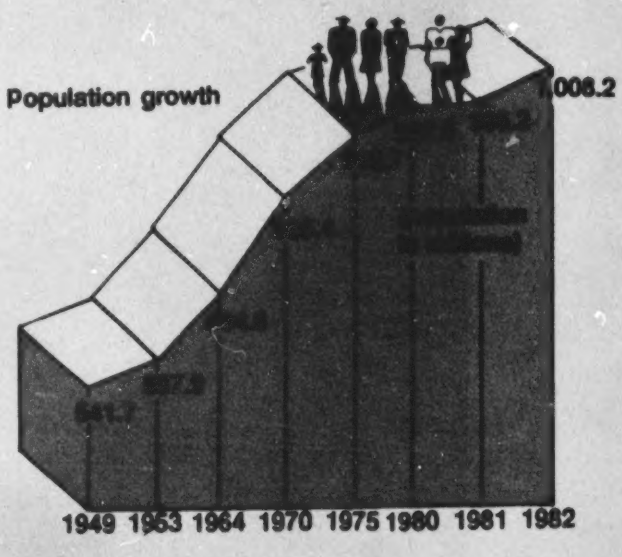
The reason for the discrepancies was lack of factual information about the population of China. Therefore each demographic information center had to make "educated guesses" about China and, consequently, the world.

Now, thanks to China's July 1, 1982 census, much of the guesswork has been eliminated. The United Nations Fund for Population Activities provided financial and technical assistance to China to carry out the awesome task and to make it as accurate as possible. When the final tallies were in, 1,008,175,288 people were counted, or roughly speaking, one billion, eight million. This is the first time in the history of the world that any country has become a "demographic billionaire."

Not only is China No. 1 in terms of population size, it is first by a large margin. Its mid-year 1983 population estimate puts China at 1,023,300,000, which means it has grown by 15 million people in the one year since the 1982 census. India—No. 2 and catching up—is "only" 730 million. In third place is the Soviet Union at 272 million and trailing in fourth place is the United States at 234 million people.

Are Chinese leaders passing out cigars as a result of the census? Quite the contrary. They have pledged to continue with even greater vigor the world's most "controlling" population control program. They, along with most of the world's governments, now realize that population size is not directly related to military power, and that rapid population growth can negate economic development gains. Indeed, a look at the top four in population size reveals that the countries in third and fourth place are in economic and military terms significantly stronger than the first and second place holders.

China's Record Population



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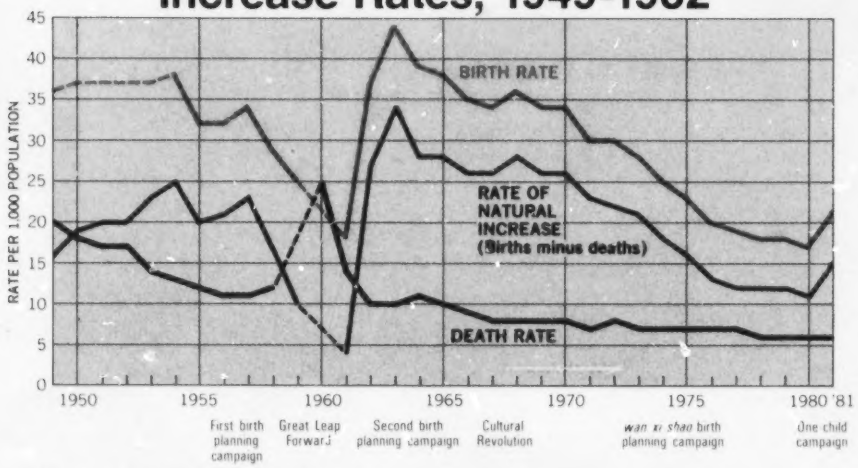
China's Birth, Death and Natural Increase Rates, 1949-1982



Source: Population Reference Bureau, Inc.

While economic and military strength are high priorities, an even more basic goal challenges Chinese leaders: how to feed a population which is over one billion people and still growing. It is a race between population growth and agricultural production; much attention is given to halting the former and accelerating the latter. To slow population growth, families are now urged to have only one child.

Changing Views

The current hard line on population growth represents a shift from earlier attitudes. Official attitudes and policies toward population usually reflect political realities or at least perceived realities. Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Chinese Republic in 1911, called for an increase in births "to preserve the Chinese race." This was an understandable viewpoint considering that since the late 1840s, China had been invaded by the British, other Western powers and Japan, and torn by internal rebellions and periodic famines. Prior to the invasions and Western dominance, China's population had steadily grown. However, during this time of turmoil, the population sometimes grew and sometimes declined, fluctuating around 400 million.

When Mao and the Communist government came to power in 1949, the population was about 540 million. Restoration of peace, expansion of health services and land reform drastically reduced death rates while birth rates remained high. Population grew rapidly; over 100 million people were added in the first eight years of the People's Republic.

This was fine with Mao at first. Brimming with optimism after winning the revolution, he declared that "revolution plus production" would solve the problem of feeding and employing the already enormous population of China. A growing population was regarded then as more hands to produce goods and food, not just more mouths to be fed. "Of all things in the world, people are the most precious... As long as there are people, every kind of miracle can be performed," declared Mao.

By 1957, Mao's enthusiasm for population growth had dimmed. He called for a 10-year family planning program (to complement an already existing but modest family planning effort to improve the health of mothers and children). Mao noted that "...as far as procreation is concerned, the human race has been in a state of total anarchy and has failed to exercise control." This first birth planning program was interrupted by the turmoil of the Great Leap Forward of 1958-1959, crop failure and famine in 1960 and 1961, and the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1969. Nonetheless, birth rates began to drop considerably in the mid-1960s.

Wan Xi Shao

In 1971, the *wan xi shao** family planning program was launched to put an end to "reproductive anarchy." From that point on, it was decided that human numbers must be regulated to be in proportion to "material production"—that is, the ability to feed, clothe, shelter and employ people, and to improve living standards. Unlike capitalist countries where family planning is left up to individual couples, China's population plan would be based on "the principle of coordination between state guidance and mass voluntarism." That is, the state would set the goals and the masses would voluntarily comply.

Thus began the most organized fertility control program the world has known, stressing late marriage (mid-twenties for women, late twenties for men), three to four years between births and a two-child family. Overall population plans are determined at the national level and then passed down through various bureaucratic levels until they are implemented at the grassroots level. Leaders at every level are responsible for achieving the birth planning goals, and individual couples are rewarded for compliance or penalized for noncompliance with the norms.

At the local level, there are birth planning leadership groups who work through rural communes, production brigades and resident committees in urban areas. These groups supervise the "barefoot doctors" (or paramedicals) and others who deliver contraceptives to households and accompany men and women to health centers for one of the four birth planning procedures—tubectomy, IUD insertion and abortion for women, and vasectomy for men. Methods to limit births are accessible to every couple.

Those responsible for birth planning meet with individuals and groups to encourage compliance with the birth quotas. They draw up birth plans for the coming year for the commune or production brigade. Couples authorized to have a child are issued a planned birth certificate which they must bring to all prenatal health visits. Local groups are also charged with providing incentives to people undergoing birth planning procedures and couples pledging to have only one child.

Birth planning units work closely under Communist Party leaders. It seems that almost everyone is involved in spreading the word against population growth—the Party, the police, school systems, the Women's Federation as well as those who provide health care. Peer group pres-

*Wan xi shao means "later" (marriages), "longer" (intervals between births), "fewer" (children)

sure to have the "right" number of children at the "right" time is strong. Those who have unplanned (unapproved) pregnancies are encouraged to have abortions. In some cases, it is reported that coercion rather than encouragement is closer to the truth.

In spite of impressive fertility declines in the 1970s (due to regulations raising the age at which one can marry and the enforcement of birth planning norms), Chinese leaders realized that more must be done. With an extra-large group of young people about to enter their reproductive years, even a two-child family would mean continued population growth for at least a half century more.

The One-Child Campaign

New goals were established in 1978: Almost all couples in the future should have only one child "so that the total population of China will be controlled at about 1.2 billion by the end of the century." But would the people agree and comply? Surveys of people's attitudes toward family size suggested that, while urban couples were more willing, less than 20 percent of China's married couples would voluntarily stop at one child. The Birth Planning Leading Group then decided to initiate a system of rewards and penalties.

Those couples who have one child and who pledge to have no more receive "only child glory certificates." These certificates entitle couples to various benefits such as free medical care and school tuition for their child, monthly cash bonuses or work points in rural areas (for extra food and supplies), preferential treatment in housing, extra old-age pensions in urban areas or a guaranteed standard of living equal to the local standard for those living in the countryside. The only child when grown up would receive preferential treatment for jobs.

Penalties commonly require that those who break their pledge by having a second child must return all benefits. Those who have a third child have their monthly wages reduced by 10 percent or more, must remain in housing meant for a two-child family and are charged for the extra child's rations.

Results so far have been impressive. Over 15 million one-child certificates had been issued by August of 1982. As in all previous birth planning campaigns, results vary between

Tema David

Fifteen million couples in China have pledged to have only one child.

urban areas and the countryside (where almost 80 percent of the people live). In one city, 95 percent of all one-child couples had pledged to have no more, while in one rural province, only 25 percent of such couples agreed to stop at one.

Prospects for the Future

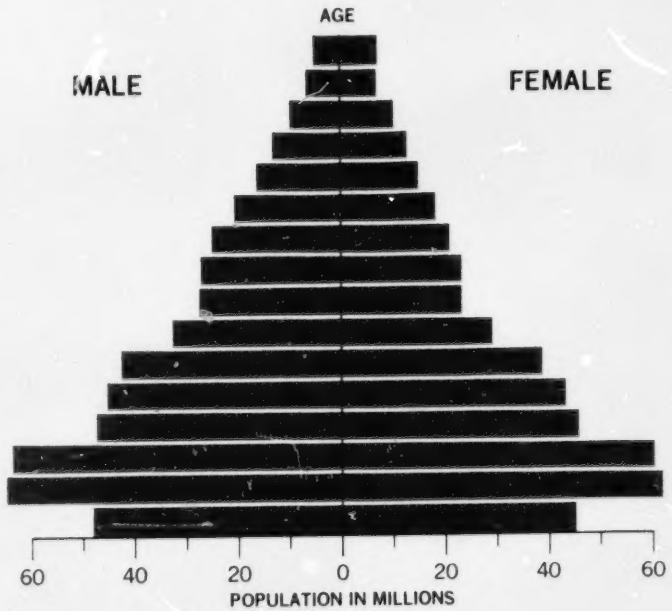
H. Yuan Tien, China-born author of *China: Demographic Billionaire,* a Population Reference Bureau *Bulletin,* believes that the goal of limiting the population to 1.2 billion by the end of the century is unrealistic. One obstacle is the high cost of the benefits offered to one-child families. The cost of the benefits has been borne by the urban employing units and rural production teams. In one urban unit, two-thirds of its welfare fund had to be allocated to one-child certificate holders. It appears likely that the benefits will have to be paid out of national funds if the one-child campaign is to succeed.

Another obstacle to the one-child family is the strong preference for males in Chinese society. Reports of female infanticide have surfaced. Public warning by government officials against the practice have been issued widely. A recent study showed in one urban neighborhood that among children under the age of one, there were 154 males to every 100 females, and in some rural villages the male to female infant ratios were even higher.* The male preference is so strong that evidently the one-child policy has encouraged infanticide when the first child turns out to be a girl.

Also encouraging higher fertility is the absence for 90 percent of the population of an adequate old-age pension system. The vast majority of the elderly depend on their children to support them. Unless this fact changes, many couples will continue

*The sex ratio at birth in most countries is 105 males to every 100 females.

Age-Sex Composition of China's Population, 1978



Source: Population Reference Bureau, Inc.

to want the security of at least two children.

A new agricultural policy may also work at odds with the population policy. Farmers may now keep or sell on the free market any food produced beyond an assigned quota. Parents may feel that having more children will help increase farm output and thus their family incomes. To combat this possibility, some localities have introduced high fines for unauthorized births and others have rewarded one-child families with double the usual size plot of land.

In spite of these obstacles, Chinese leaders are intent on limiting population growth in order to improve living standards. Because an estimated 240 million couples will marry between 1982 and 2000, it seems impossible that the goal of reaching no more than 1.2 billion could be reached. According to Dr. Tien, 1.35 billion is a more likely figure and even that number will depend on a continuing, zealous population control program.

What the future holds for China's population is unclear. Will most people eventually agree to the one-child family? Will people agree to new policies channeling "excess" rural population into small cities and towns and away from the big cities? China-watchers believe the decades ahead will be exciting ones. But one must remember that the expression "May you live in interesting times" is an ancient Chinese curse.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does the Chinese government want to control its population growth?
2. Why has China adopted such strong measures, such a the one-child family campaign?
3. Why did the population of China grow so rapidly in the first eight years after Mao Zedong came to power?
4. What are some features of the Chinese family planning program?
5. Why is it likely that China will exceed the desired 1.2 billion population size by 2000?
6. Many people admire China for coming to grips with its population problems so forcefully; many others criticize China for intruding on the personal lives of their citizens and for its system of rewards and penalties. What is your opinion?
7. Some say abuses such as female infanticide are inevitable when strong measures like the one-child family campaign are adopted. How could the government reduce such abuses?
8. Does the U.S. need a population policy? Would a Chinese-style population program work in the U.S.? Would it work elsewhere?

References and Resources

The essay above was based entirely on the PRB *Population Bulletin* **"China: Demographic Billionaire"** by H. Yuan Tien. Interested readers are urged to obtain a copy of this 41-page report for a more complete review of the demographic situation in the People's Republic of China. A single copy is $3 (2-10 copies, $2.30 each; 11-50, $1.90 each). Add $1.00 shipping/handling on any order under $20.00. Send your check to PRB, 2213 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

Other Resources

"Birth Planning in China" (Draper Fund Report, No. 8, March 1980) is a compilation of trip report excerpts and journal notes written by visitors to China between 1977 and 1979. Available at no charge from the Population Crisis Committee, 1120 Nineteenth St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

"China in the Classroom" is a resource catalogue produced by The Center for Teaching About China. This 19-page catalogue includes a wide variety of resources, listed according to grade level and subject. It is available at no charge from The Center for Teaching About China, 110 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002.

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